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ABSTRACT

Impression management refers to the concept that people engaged in interaction will attempt to control the image of themselves that others form. This provides a foundation for social interaction, giving others information about who we are and what to expect from us. A central concern of impression management is the manner in which we are evaluated by others, i.e., if they react toward us as we intend our self-presentation has been successful. Social anxieties (e.g., stagefright, shyness, embarrassment) are tied to impression management because the fundamental concern in all these problems stems from the prospect of evaluation from others. Within this fundamental similarity, however, the bases for social anxiety may differ according to social setting, and according to whether a predicament which makes us look bad has actually occurred or whether we just fear it might. A combination of high motivation to make a "good impression" and a perceived likelihood of failure creates the fundamental stress of social anxiety. Impression management also emphasizes that social anxiety is produced by an interaction of situational and personal characteristics; this suggests that there is no one specific treatment for all victims of social anxiety, but that a variety and combination of treatment modalities (e.g., cognitive therapy, or social skills training) should be used, as required, for each individual. (WAS)

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IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT AND THE CONTROL OF SOCIAL ANXIETIES

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Impression Management and the Control of Social Anxieties

Let me first acknowledge the influence of two of my friends on the remarks I'll make in this paper; Barry Schlenker of the University of Florida and Mark Leary, currently at Denison University have convinced me of the usefulness of an impression management approach to social anxiety, and I'll be reporting some of their ideas to you today (cf. Leary, 1982; Schlenker & Leary, 1982). However, if you disagree with any of my comments, you'll probably be questioning my own elaborations and generalizations, not their basic approach itself.

Having said that, let me try to convince you as I have been convinced. "Impression management" refers to a social psychological perspective which emphasizes the premise that, whenever we engage in interaction with others, we have a stake in attempting to control the images of us that others form. Impression management is a label for our efforts to present to others a consistent portrait of our abilities, attitudes, and attributes that will determine how others judge us, evaluate us, and behave towards us. In most cases this means that we will try to manage an image for others that is socially desirable, so as to gain their approval, acceptance, and esteem. Now, I must emphasize that impression management does not ordinarily involve dissimulation, misrepresentation, or the fraudulent effort to appear to others as things that we are not. On occasion we stretch the truth a little. But as a matter of daily life, impression management means that we try to portray the things that we are, that is, normal, stable, reasonably well-adjusted people with particular competencies and a few foibles. It gives us a foundation for social interaction, providing others with information about who we are and an idea of what to expect from us.

Let me give you an example. A week-and-a-half ago, I found myself in the University of Houston bookstore on the afternoon before Houston played North Carolina State for the NCAA basketball championship. The place was a madhouse. The store was jammed with people, and all of them seemed in a frenzy to get their own "Phi Slamma Jama" t-shirts, buttons, and decals. Anything with the University insignia on it was selling at a rapid pace, and I'd guess that these items were more than mere souvenirs. In many cases, I'd wager that the customers felt that the time was right for them to publicly display their affiliation with, as well as their allegiance toward, the University. On that afternoon, when the entire city looked upon the Houston campus with fondness, it was timely for anyone remotely associated with the University to quietly note, "I belong; I'm part of U.H., too." The customers were basking in the reflected glory of the basketball team, increasing their association with a valued entity, and thereby indirectly enhancing their own public images (cf. Cialdini & Richardson, 1980). I'd bet, too, that the next day, after Houston lost the championship game, that the number of people wearing U.H. t-shirts around town was greatly reduced. In part, that's impression management.

One more example to elaborate the concept of impression management: we all know what it feels like to be embarrassed. It's an uncomfortable state of mortification, awkwardness, abashment, and chagrin. But when do we experience embarrassment? It occurs whenever we have failed to adequately manage our impressions, that is, whenever unexpected information about us has become known to our audience and threatens to disrupt or endanger whatever stable, favorable image of us they possess. Thus, another way of illustrating the importance of impression management is to

note how we feel when we fail to do it well. That we strive to avoid embarrassment is to say that we strive to avoid surprises or inconsistencies in the presentation of ourselves to others.

Please note that a central concern of impression management is the manner in which we are being evaluated by others. The judgments of us that others form are the criterion by which the success of our impression--managing efforts is measured. If others react toward us as we intend, then our self-presentation has been a success; if not, then we have been unsuccessful.

It is this emphasis on the evaluative reactions of others that ties impression management so closely to the study of social anxieties. What are social anxieties? Social anxiety is any anxiety resulting from either the prospect or presence of interpersonal evaluation in real or imagined social situations. That's a broad definition, but it serves to encompass related phenomena which have been regarded for too long as conceptually distinct. A person who appears on stage before an audience may have "stage fright". A young male who is apprehensive about dating may have "heterosocial anxiety". Those who feel awkward talking to strangers are "shy". Some people can't bear to give speeches and suffer "speech anxiety". Split our pants in public and we feel "embarrassed." Researchers have generally focused on these as specific, unique problems, but in each case the fundamental concern is generated by the prospect of evaluation from others. Although the situations in which they occur may vary, all of these social anxieties are grounded in the concern that one may be unable to adequately manage one's impression so as to procure a favorable evaluation from one's audience. In every case, we fear we won't be accepted by

those looking on.

So, the first application of impression management to the study of social anxieties is the recognition that a wide array of interpersonal problems may all be based on the same psychological phenomenon. Then, with the understanding that social anxieties share a fundamental similarity, we can more cogently determine how they may differ. First, the nature of the situation: social settings differ with regard to whether or not our actions are contingent upon the behavior of others who are present. In contingent interactions, the things we do and say are greatly influenced by the prior actions of others; these are encounters in which we are truly inter-acting with someone else, and our expectations and strategies of how to behave must be continually updated and revised. Making conversation on one's first date is a prototypical--and often painful--example. By contrast, in noncontingent interactions, our behavior is largely unaffected by how others are acting, and, indeed, our part may have been planned well in advance. For the most part, delivering this paper is, for me, a noncontingent interaction with you. The distinction between these two types of settings is meaningful because they require slightly different self-presentational skills; those who feel at ease spontaneously interacting in a casual conversation may feel less poised in a structured, formal role before a large number of people.

We can also distinguish between situations in which something that makes us look bad has already occurred, and those in which we fear it might. Social anxiety may arise from an actual predicament, as in embarrassment, or merely from our belief that something may go wrong, as in shyness. Thus, we can ask whether the anxiety was the result of a

particular event, and together, the two dimensions we've discussed provide a meaningful classification of various social anxieties (Table 1). I think a scheme like this accomplishes two valuable objectives; first, it clarifies how these problems can differ, and allows for situational variation that may influence how victims respond to them, but second, it emphasizes that these problems are really more similar than they are different, all being grounded in a concern for one's evaluation by others.

At this point we should briefly consider other theoretical approaches to social anxiety. A classical conditioning approach assumes that social settings cause anxiety when they have been associated with aversive consequences in the past. Practitioners following this approach may choose to employ systematic desensitization to allow clients to face social situations more calmly (cf. Kanter & Goldfried, 1979). An alternative approach, the skills deficit model, suggests that people experience social anxiety when they do not possess adequate social skills, and hence, constantly mismanage their interactions. Practitioners endorsing this model would likely choose to teach clients new skills (cf. Bellack & Hersen, 1979). A third approach assumes that social anxiety need not result from an actual skill deficit; the individual's <u>belief</u> that s/he is inadequate is a sufficient cause. This cognitive self-evaluation model suggests that faulty cognition causes anxiety, and points to rational restructuring as an effective therapy (cf. Kanter & Goldfried, 1979). Finally, an individual difference or trait approach suggests that there may be enduring personality types that are predisposed to suffer social anxiety; this model seeks to identify those people at particular risk.

Each of these traditional approaches offers an important perspective

on the experience of social anxiety and each of them has attracted its fair share of adherents and advocates. But one gets the feeling that each of them explains only a portion of what we need to know, that each one leaves something important out. I believe that an impression management approach offers a more comprehensive, parsimonious explanation of social anxiety and provides a needed basis for integrating the diverse contributions of the other models. We've seen that a concern for the images of us that others hold underlies both the nature of impression management and the experience of social anxiety. The impression management approach builds on this foundation and suggests that people experience social anxiety when a.) they are motivated to make particular impressions on others, they care about generating a particular reaction from them, but b.) doubt that they will be able to do so. It is the combination of these two factors, high motivation and the perceived likelihood of failure, that create the damaging and dysfunctional distress of social anxiety.

Indeed, these two factors will always affect the mood with which we interact with others. If our motivation to impress another is low, we'll be indifferent to him, relatively disinterested and disengaged. If we're absolutely certain of a favorable reaction from the other, we'll be complacent. If our motivation is high and our expectations moderate, we'll be challenged. But if our motivation is high and our expectation low, we'll be anxious.

As an example, consider a young man pursued at a party by an unappealing woman in whom he is not interested. As he makes pleasant conversation with her, he is barely aware of what she must think of him because, indeed, he hardly cares. He is totally at ease and even a little nonresponsive and if she compliments him, he is mostly indifferent. Obviously, his concern for his presentation of self is negligible. But then into the room walks another

woman he's had his eye on, and his pulse quickens. He thinks, "I hoped she'd be here" and as he edges over to her he wonders how he looks, how he smells, and what he should say. When he introduces himself, he's alert to every nonverbal nuance, and all his attention is focused on their exchange. He searches for common interests, and ponders how best to mention his recent symposium at SWPA without seeming immodest. He smiles his friendliest smile, but when she says," you know, you have a big plug of broccoli stuck between your teeth," he can't think of another competent thing to say. He sheepishly retreats, mentally crossing her off his list because he won't be bold enough to approach her again. Though he would like to make a positive impression on her, he can't conceive of how to do it now. Take that example and turn up the thermostat a little bit and you've got social anxiety.

Another important aspect of this example is that we see a person who is comfortable in his interaction with one person become relatively anxious in his meeting with somebody else. One of the clear advantages of the impression management perspective over other approaches to social anxiety is its insistence that it is an interaction of situational and personal characteristics that produces social anxiety. Concern for one's image is an interpersonal problem, so the nature of the situation and the particular audience one faces should interact with one's own dispositional makeup to affect social distress. Indeed, that seems to happen, and people who experience social anxiety in one situation may not feel distress before a different audience (cf. Galassi & Galassi, 1979). No other approach to social anxiety acknowledges the interaction of person and situation as explicitly as does impression management.

According to this model, factors that increase a person's desire to convey a particular impression and/or lead her to believe that she will be

unable to succeed will tend to increase social anxiety. Thus, one would expect that important, attractive, powerful, large audiences; the importance and centrality of the image being presented; and personality variables like public self-consciousness, need for approval, and fear of negative evaluation should affect one's motivation to impress others and, therefore, increase social anxiety. The research literature shows they do (Schlenker & Leary, 1982). Similarly, one should find that critical audiences; novel and unstructured situations; unexpected events; and personal factors like perceived skill deficits and low self-esteem decrease one's confidence in a successful self-presentation and also increase social anxiety. Again, one finds they do (Schlenker & Leary, 1982). So, the impression management perspective fits the available evidence, and by encompassing both person and situation, it surpasses any other model.

We are at last at a point where we can consider the application of the impression management perspective to the treatment and control of social anxieties. Herein lies another advantage of the impression management approach; it suggests that although social anxiety will always be grounded in a concern for how one is appearing to others, the precipitating factors will not be the same for all individuals. In short, it suggests that there is no one treatment that will be best for all victims of social anxiety.

Indeed, recent clinical investigations provide evidence that that is probably true. Curran and his colleagues (Curran, Wallander, & Fischetti, 1980) have recently distinguished two types of men suffering heterosexual dating anxiety--those with adequate social skills who misperceive and underestimate their own skill levels, and those who correctly realize that their skill levels are very poor. Similarly, Pilkonis (1977) has cited differences

between publicly and privately shy individuals; those who are publicly shy are concerned with their behavioral difficulty in managing their interactions, while those who are privately shy appear to do fine but quietly doubt themselves. Such distinctions have led Galassi and Galassi (1979) to argue that "the search for the single best treatment package seems misdirected" (p. 178); for them, the issue is "which treatments are most effective for which problems and for which clients" (p. 178).

The impression management approach allows for this diversity. From this perspective, the question is, why does the person doubt that his/her self-presentation will be successful? There are several possibilities. One client may accurately recognize that his social skills are deficient; he has difficulty managing social interactions and he knows it. In this case, it seems unlikely that any cognitive rational restructuring would be indicated. Instead, a straightforward attempt to teach the person useful skills would likely be most helpful.

Other clients may possess reasonably good skills but be reluctant to use them because of an exaggeratedly negative self-evaluation. Though capable, they fear they will fail. Here, rational restructuring is the treatment of choice, leading the person to correctly perceive their existing capabilities.

Still other clients may be relatively skillful and reasonably perceptive but entirely oversensitive to the evaluations of others. They may be too dependent upon the good will of everyone they meet or may take to heart the reactions of others to whom they should be indifferent. Other clients may enjoy favorable reactions from others but be plagued by unrealistically high personal standards which doom them to disappointment. In either of these cases, an attempt to change the irrational belief system which supports the

social anxiety is indicated.

Finally, clients may fear for their success because of uncertainty with regard to how they should behave. They may have an adequate repertoire of social skills and be confident in their use, but lack the sensitivity that might allow them to quickly judge the norms and expectations of an audience which should guide their behavior. A training program in sensitivity toward social cues might be efficacious here.

Thus, an impression management approach considers a broader array of possible antecedents of social anxiety than any other model, but importantly, is not incompatible with any other approach. Instead, by focusing our attention on the concern for one's self-image that creates social anxiety, the impression management perspective provides an integrative base for combining all that we know about the problem. It links together as a single psychological phenomenon several experiences that researchers have traditionally treated as separate problems. It emphasizes both personal and situational factors that contribute to our social woes. And finally, it stresses that selection of a therapy should be geared to the precise self-presentational problem that troubles a particular client, and that there is no one therapy that is always the treatment of choice. To the extent, that such a perspective helps us to more easily benefit others, I daresay it's worthy of note.

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TABLE 1

Classifying Social Anxieties

		Type of Interaction	
		Contingent	Noncontingent
Has a predicament occurred?	NO	shyness dating anxiety interaction anxiety heterosocial anxiety	stage fright speech anxiety audience anxiety communication apprehension
	YES	embarrassment shame loss of face	embarrassment shame loss of face

(adapted from Schlenker & Leary, 1982)